

A Gullah Jazz Aesthetic | Our Gift to American Culture

By Dr. Karen Chandler

“It is no wonder that so much of the search for identity among American Negroes was championed by Jazz musicians. Long before the modern essayists and scholars wrote of racial identity as a problem for a multiracial world, musicians were returning to their roots to affirm that which was stirring within their souls...And now, Jazz is exported to the world. For in the particular struggle of the Negro in America there is something akin to the universal struggle of modern man. Everybody has the Blues. Everybody longs for meaning. Everybody needs to love and be loved. Everybody needs to clap hands and be happy. Everybody longs for faith.”¹

The vocal and rhythmic utterances of enslaved Africans that survived the Middle Passage and isolation in the Gullah Geechee region of Charleston and the South Carolina Lowcountry, and that were sung, shouted, clapped, and stomped in praise houses, were among the first distinct syncopated sounds and rhythmic lilt in the New World. With tonal and song-like influences from West African speech and dialect, and the visceral sensibility and feeling that informs musicians’ jazz style and practice, these and other Africanisms are the soul of a Gullah aesthetic, and may be the purest African assessment in musical language in the United States.

²Though little known or embraced fully in the jazz canon, this Gullah (or Charleston) rhythm is the inventive contribution of a people and their heritage, one that is inherently and authentically Gullah, and undeniably, an American living artifact. These pronouncements represent the search for Charleston’s jazz identity by the Charleston Jazz Initiative (CJI).

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “On the Importance of Jazz” (Berlin: Berlin Jazz Festival, September 1964). This quote was included in a speech Dr. King gave at the first Berlin Jazz Festival in 1964.

² This statement represents the research that the Charleston Jazz Initiative (CJI) has been examining since 2003. It is a defining premise of our work.

CJI was called into existence March 25, 2003, at the Avery Research Center, the former school that began educating Black Charlestonians in 1868, by the daughters and sons whose stories the initiative is uncovering. It is a loosely organized network of colleagues engaged in unearthing hidden and fragmented stories and discovering new narratives and interpretations of Charleston's contributions to early jazz. They are jazz musicians, journalists, writers and critics, archivists, ethnomusicologists and historians, visual and design artists, photographers, video producers and filmmakers, arts educators and managers, family members of the musicians we're studying, and a universe of other folk interested in this unfolding jazz story. Each brings their own colorful lens (particularly CJI video producer and photo-documentarian Tony Bell's peering and up-close perspective) to inform the scholarship, teaching, artistry, and creative dissemination of the initiative.

I have been meaningfully engaged with those from this Gullah soil in contributing to a narrative that has questioned prevailing notions of jazz historiography and Charleston's role in the origins of this American art form. Jazz history is often told by focusing on clear geographical centers that blur the real complexity of a music which, after all, was not just "invented" over a hundred years ago but is the result of cultural negotiations between people of different origins, in different places, at different times, and under different conditions.

If we accept the premise that jazz or any cultural product, for that matter, has not had a static birth nor has its journey followed a specific footprint, then we, in turn, must question traditional views of the roots of jazz history, expand our discourse about when, where, how, and by whom complex rhythms and other musical Africanisms were heard and practiced, and debunk that old jazz history cliché that this art form originated in New Orleans, traveled up the river to Chicago, then to New York and over to Kansas City, and finally made its way to

Los Angeles. This great American music has its inception in these and many other places and has been shaped by myriad cultural influences and traditions that are the result of place and memory on both sides of the Black Atlantic – and the Gullah Geechee coastal region is one such place. Without inserting Charleston in this dialogue or embracing a Gullah Geechee aesthetic sensibility, our understanding of jazz and its origins is narrow at best and largely undefined.

The pulse of CJI began with its co-founder, the iconic Jack McCray, Charleston's jazz aficionado who gave us all so much – his love of music, notably jazz, his words and voice, limitless discoveries, and all cultured things. Jack guided our work until his untimely passing in 2011. He penned an essay, yet unpublished, titled *What Is This Thing Called Jazz* to contextualize CJI's vision:

The practice of this jazz craft is not limited to enslaved Africans and their descendants. It's a quest that has as its goal humanity, the pursuit of which is at the bottom of all African culture, which makes its practice accessible to everyone. It's a human response to life's circumstances that attempts to turn obstacles into opportunities. It's the only art form that seeks perfection in real time. Jazz is a blues response to the travails of life, mundane and extraordinary, that has evolved as the signature American artifact.

The practice of jazz by musicians from Gullah soil is the subject of a chapter in an American jazz story that's yet to be fully told. Many of these musicians learned their craft at a Charleston orphanage. Established in 1891 by the Rev. Daniel Joseph Jenkins, a patriarch of this country's Black leadership movement, the Jenkins Orphanage was chartered by South Carolina as the Orphan Aid Society, Inc. in 1892. He was a visionary leader who gained a worldwide reputation for his charitable benevolence, and with fundraising and entrepreneurial acumen he developed the orphanage. For several decades, the Jenkins Orphanage

Bands (there were five over the life of the orphanage) were the orphanage's primary revenue stream.

Some of the Jenkins Orphanage and other musicians from the Palmetto State include inventive multi-instrumentalists, band leaders, vocalists, composers, and arrangers who not only innovated musical techniques and sounds that were used in compositions in the Great American Songbook but transmitted this characteristic sound worldwide through touring, big band concerts, and recordings. Some of these musical stories include Jenkins' resident Cat Anderson, Duke Ellington's high-note trumpet player; Bubber Miley, the trumpeter who helped create the signature jungle sound heard in many Ellington tunes, including "East St. Louis Toodle-Oo" and "Black and Tan Fantasy"; Charleston native Chippie Hill, a blues vocalist who led ensembles with Louis Armstrong on cornet in 1920s Chicago; Georgia native and Jenkins orphan Jabbo Smith, a prolific songwriter and recording artist of the 1920s and 1930s and most known for his trumpet duels with Louis Armstrong; Jenkins band musician Geechie Harper, who Langston Hughes dedicated his autobiography, *The Big Sea to*; Julian Dash, an Avery graduate, who was the tenor saxophonist with Erskine Hawkins and co-wrote the jazz standard "Tuxedo Junction"; Tommy Benford, the ace drummer who remembers playing with the Jenkins Orphanage band as a kid in 1913 and "swinging" the music, and whose Gullah-styled approach to drumming can be heard on Jelly Roll Morton's recordings of the late 1920s; James Jamerson, an Edisto Island native who was the innovative bass player for the Funk Brothers, the Motown studio band and musical engine behind those great Motown hits; and of course, Cheraw, South Carolina, native Dizzy Gillespie, the trumpeter-bandleader and innovator of bebop and Afro-Cuban jazz.

This seminal story continues with orchestral composer Edmund Thornton Jenkins, Reverend Jenkins' son, who used Gullah-inspired motifs in his *American*

Folk Rhapsody: Charlestonian. Active in London's Black political and cultural scene beginning in 1914, he founded the Coterie of Friends and organized cultural programs at events for people of African descent including the 1921 and 1923 Pan-African Congresses, for which W.E.B. Du Bois was a delegate. Jenkins was also a jazz instrumentalist and prominent player in Paris at the height of the 1920s Jazz Age.

And there was Charlestonian Freddie Green, a pioneering figure of the swing era and a revolutionary contributor to the Gullah jazz aesthetic. Though not an orphan, Green studied music at the Jenkins Orphanage and was Count Basie's rhythm guitarist for nearly fifty years. According to Basie, he defined swing with his steady and driving rhythmic pulse with the best rhythm section of the jazz ages. Wynton Marsalis praised Green's unprecedented rhythm guitar technique by referring to its constant and metronomic pulse as "the guts of the music" in a discussion of how he adapted it for the seventh movement of his *Blues Symphony*.³ Green's rhythm guitar was the heartbeat of the Basie band that provided the foundation upon which Basie and his band members could romp around and improvise on top of.

Charleston's jazz story is not just a historic one. It lives today in Ranky Tanky. "Get funky" is the loose translation of this quintet of native South Carolinians, four Gullah descendants, and one disciple, who are 2020 Grammy winners in the Best Regional Roots Music Album category. This ensemble infuses original and refreshingly imaginative interpretations of Gullah shouts, game songs, and spirituals, and maintains an active tour schedule of high-energy performances around the globe. Nurtured by their own lived experiences, they are preserving this regional sound with present-day innovations not unlike what their Gullah

³ Wynton Marsalis, "Talking About Blues Symphony: Movement VII" (2009), <https://www.facebook.com/wyntonmarsalis/videos/239032991330045/>

descendants did centuries earlier. Gullah rhythm, then, is representative of both a past and living history, making it a historically novel and contemporary artifact of American cultural heritage and a gift to the world.

CJI colleague and Ranky Tanky percussionist and jazz drummer Quentin Baxter, who grew up in a Pentecostal church in Charleston (with a mother who played drums in that church), tells us that it was there “the Gullah language, its strong rhythmic characteristics and quick syncopations, [and] the aggressive sound of its vocabulary” affects the way he approaches the practice of his instrument even today. “I grew up in a community which informed my feeling of pitch, rhythm, timbre, and micro-form. My music is heavily influenced by a translation of such aspects of [Gullah] language.”⁴

GULLAH SUITE:
A Tribute to Buddy Johnson & John Birks "Dizzy" Gillespie
Part II - The Connection
by Slide Hampton

Vamp 'til cue
♩ = 144

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Baxter’s Ranky Tanky partner, trumpeter-vocalist Charlton Singleton, added that there is a personal sensibility that shows up in the playing of Gullah rhythm by individual musicians. He explained that though one can notate Gullah rhythms, the playing of them can vary significantly among musicians. One example is the rhythmic motif in *Gullah Suite*, a three-movement work by trombonist Slide

⁴ Wolfram Knauer, ed., *Gender and Identity in Jazz* (Darmstadt: Jazzinstitut Darmstadt, 2016), 24-25.

Hampton.⁵ The rhythm in the first measure, the dotted quarter, eighth note, quarter rest, quarter note, is how most musicians would notate this Gullah rhythm but not necessarily how one would *feel* and play it.

Singleton explained: “That is how the rhythm looks on paper. However, there is a feel to it that I don’t think can be notated. An accent in some places is brought about from that feel and that is purely in the moment.”⁶ This individuality and in-the-moment sensed quality in the performance of Gullah rhythms is just as distinct as the rhythm itself.

It is shortsighted that the predominant ways many have come to understand Charleston’s contribution to American culture is Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*, spirituals, and the dance, The Charleston. Gullah rhythm and song have been retained and shared with the world by Jenkins Orphanage musicians, Ranky Tanky, and countless other descendants of the craft with inventiveness as its soulful core. Little did we know that CJI’s journey would unearth a fuller story of the little-known contributions from yesterday and today that Gullah descendants have made to the American jazz canon.

Printed with the permission of Dr. Karen Chandler. Dr. Chandler's essay will appear in an upcoming collection of essays and poems, "Ukweli, Searching for Healing Truth: South Carolina writers and poets explore American racism." Evening Post Books will release the book in the spring of 2022.

⁵ In 2010, CJI commissioned Slide Hampton to compose *Gullah Suite*. It is the title track on *Legends*, CJI’s first CD that received major funding from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Hampton was recognized in 2005 with the Jazz Masters Award, the highest honor given to a jazz musician in the United States by the NEA.

⁶ Charlton Singleton, Text Interview (October 16, 2016).